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The Libyan Crisis: Romney's "Curve Ball" or "Terrible Course"?

By Joseph C Y Liow

Synopsis

The wave of mob attacks on US embassies in the Arab world over a video mocking Islam has pushed foreign policy to the forefront of the US presidential election campaign. However the Republican candidate's attempt to capitalise on the crisis may not work to his advantage.

Commentary

SINCE THE end of the Cold War, foreign policy issues have seldom featured prominently in US presidential election campaigns. Notwithstanding the considerable challenges posed to American foreign and security policy over the last two decades by the rise of China, the crises in European security, and the scourge of terrorism against American targets, the elections since 1992 have been determined more by domestic economic issues than anything else.

Even the 2008 election was, ultimately, decided more by the financial crisis and economic collapse than the Afghan or Iraqi quagmire.

Caught in the crossfire

In the wake of the recent death of four Americans, including Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens in Libya, Republican candidate Mitt Romney has attempted to bring foreign policy to the fore of the 2012 campaign. At first glance, the disadvantage of incumbency is that any unforeseen crisis can be used by opponents to discredit the administration, or at least to throw it off its planned trajectory. To use a baseball analogy, this is known as the "curve ball".

Indeed, candidate Barack Obama himself capitalised on the negative sentiments towards the Bush administration generated by the 2008 credit crunch to devastating political effect. This time around, his Republican opponent is attempting to do the same on a brewing foreign policy crisis.

The attack on the US consulate in Benghazi which killed Ambassador Stevens and three others, ironically on 11 September, was triggered by the release of an obscure but highly provocative film on youtube titled "The Innocence of Muslims" that allegedly ridiculed the Prophet Muhammad. A mass protest ensued, which culminated in the consulate in Benghazi being fired upon and attacked with hand-made bombs. Ironically Ambassador Stevens had been the US point man with the Libyan opposition in Benghazi that led the revolt

against Gaddafi's regime last year.

Romney's accusation of weak response

The Benghazi attack was condemned "in the strongest terms" by President Obama, who also condemned "all efforts to denigrate the religion of others". Romney, however, has politicised the issue and accused the Obama administration of a weak response to the situation in Libya as well as Egypt, where protesters had also assaulted the US embassy. In particular, he took issue with the White House's call for religious tolerance, criticising the administration for focusing more on the makers of the film than those who perpetrated the violence against Americans. This is consistent with his mantra that the Obama administration has been "too soft" on America's enemies.

Romney's response to the President's comments was that "it's a terrible course for America to stand in apology for our values". By making reference to American "values" Romney's intent was clearly to make this a fundamental election issue; he asked if the Obama administration's policies abroad have promoted or undermined "American values".

Romney's opportunism however, might well have further unveiled his naiveté on foreign policy issues. For starters, he has been made to look amateurish on foreign policy by Obama and other foreign policy veterans with no connection to the current administration. Obama described the episode as a "broader lesson" in how to be a Commander-in-Chief, while a former Deputy Secretary of State reportedly opined that Romney "will find out that first reports from the battlefield are always incorrect".

Strains in relations with Muslim world

Overall, Romney's position also speaks to the kind of Manichean worldview that can only further strain the already difficult relations that America has with much of the Muslim world. By tolerating unwarranted religious provocations especially amidst fragile political transitions and a tense geopolitical climate in the Middle East, Romney has taken American "values" to its extreme and played up the theme of the clash between "Islam" and the "West".

The result can only be further provocation and violence, thereby making Americans even more insecure. Indeed, if senior US officials are right in their view that the attack may not have been spontaneous but rather the calculated work of extremist groups (and possibly Al Qaeda) that took advantage of the protest frenzy to deliberately target the embassy, then it goes to show just how high the stakes already are.

Given the halting pace of America's recovery from the 2008 credit crunch, it was widely believed that the 2012 presidential election would turn once again on domestic economic issues. Strong positions on economic issues will certainly be critical to this election campaign, and at the end of the day could well prove the decisive factor again.

However, given the severity and timing of the latest crisis in Libya, not to mention Mitt Romney's eagerness to make it a campaign issue, it also appears that foreign policy is likely to play a bigger role in the campaign and in deciding its outcome than initially thought, though it may not have the "curve ball" effect that the Republican candidate may want.

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